ANCIENT ANSWERS FOR DEVELOPING MODERN-DAY CLERGY

A Review of *The Potter's Rib: Mentoring For Pastoral Formation* by Brian A. Williams

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The contention of Williams in *The Potter's Rib* is that ancient models of mentoring may hold significant hope in the development of clergy today. The value of exploring concepts relevant to clergy leadership development is easily reflected by noting the issues currently facing clergy. Many clergy feel demoralized, and performance objectives of many ecclesiastical contexts indicate the need for leadership development. The mentoring dynamics of biblical dyads such as Paul with Timothy and Titus, historical ecclesiastical leaders focused on developing clergy, and the input of modern era church leaders are noted to have effectively developed rising clergy. The writings of Gregory of Nazianzus, a fourth-century archbishop of Constantinople, are particularly noted with high relevance to issues reflected in relational conflict of church members and the personal struggles of ministers conceptualizing their call. Particular attention is given to the context of experiential ministry as the place of development with the necessary addition of reflection with mentors. Specific suggestions are made for contextualizing the mentor/mentee relationship. The key value of William's work is to move us into considered reflection on the role that apprenticeship can serve in the development of clergy today.

I. SYNOPSIS

The unique title of *The Potter's Rib*[1] speaks of the instrument used by a potter to shape

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[1] Brian A. Williams, *The Potter's Rib: Mentoring for Pastoral Formation* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2005).

clay vessels on a spinning wheel. With this analogy in focus, Williams raises two central questions that lay a foundation for his book postulating that mentoring is an essential tool for clergy development. The two central questions that Williams asks are: "What is pastoral ministry to look like in the twenty-first century?" and "How is he or she to be educated and prepared in a culture that studiously marginalizes pastors to the unobtrusive fringe?"[2] With these questions in view, and the specific focus on the process of pastoral development as noted in the latter question, Williams moves directly into a model of pastoral development that has roots in the ancient practices of apprenticeship. The phrase noted by Williams regarding apprenticeship is "mentoring for pastoral formation."[3] Key examples of mentoring are given, including Gregory of Nazianzus, Augustine, Catherine of Siena, the apostle Paul, George Herbert, and Soren Kiekegaard, along with others. It is noted within this work that pastoral formation requires a keen focus of intentionality on the part of both mentor and mentee.

Williams contextualizes the focus of pastoral formation in the life of Gregory of Nazianzus, a fourth-century archbishop of Constantinople. Specifically, the work *In Defense of His Flight to Pontus, and His Return, After His Ordination to the Priesthood, with an Exposition of the Character of the Priestly Office* is noted.[4] Gregory of Nazianzus is noted to have influenced substantial works in pastoral formation such as John Chrysostom's *Treatise Concerning the Christian Priesthood*[5] during the fifth century, and Gregory the Great's *Book of Pastoral Rule*[6] during the sixth century. It is noted that Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Rule* served as a primary text for the development of clergy for a thousand years. Williams contextualizes the relevance of Gregory of Nazianzus to modern-day church life by noting his wisdom for dealing with the practical dimensions of discipling difficult people who are (a) ultra-conservative and unable to receive correction, (b) theologically misinformed, (c) arrogant, and (d) so steeped in relativism that they are unable to believe the truth.

Chapter one emphasizes the need of clergy spiritual formation, a deep understanding of a call to ministry, the necessity of theological undergirding within pastoral work, and practical pastoral skills. Each of these four areas is taken from Gregory's *Flight* and has a sense of face validity with clergy issues today.

Personal Transformation

Williams moves into the personal development of the pastor. This does not

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[2] Williams, *The Potter's Rib,* 9.

[3] Ibid., 10.

[4] Gregory of Nanzianzus, "In Defense of His Flight to Pontus, and His Return, After His Ordination to the Priesthood, with an Exposition of the Character of the Priestly Office," trans. C. G. Browne and J. E. Swallow, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed., ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 7:2.28-31. Hereafter, this work is referred to as *Flight*.

[5] John Chrysostom, *Treatise Concerning the Christian Priesthood, 3.16.*

[6] St. Gregory the Great, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, trans. George E. Demacopoulos, ed. John Behr (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007).

simply include having a theological understanding, but more importantly experiencing theological transformation on a personal level. The words *sapience* and *habitus* are used to emphasize an internal wisdom through theology that is practically demonstrated in the life of clergy. The essence of this chapter focuses on moving beyond a simple knowledge basis for ministry to experiential understandings that will serve as a foundation for both interpersonal and intrapersonal ministry foci.

Mentoring

Williams pointedly focuses on the dynamic of mentoring as a primary means for pastoral formation. The dyadic relationship between the mentor and mentee is centered in two concepts of place and space. Place is noted to be the context of ministry in a localized community. Space is used to reflect the idea of the interactions between the mentor and mentee. Williams postulates that the issues of place and space cannot be contextualized within the seminary itself. While he is respectful of the needed role of seminaries, he offers considerations that seminary training itself is inadequate in and of itself. The place and space issues noted for development include involvement in the areas of worship services, church administration, curriculum development and execution, counseling in formal and informal ways, outreach to those beyond the facilities of the church, and caring for the practical needs in a community. In chapter four, Williams notes that mentoring focuses on the maturation of another, which takes intensity and time. Human nature is highlighted in this chapter and is seen as a stumbling block that must be overcome in order for maturation through the means of mentoring to be accomplished.

Williams provides readers with an understanding of the necessity of a mentor to observe the developmental stages of a mentee and the value of interacting with mentee's for their development. Chapters five and six provide a sense of the depth of friendship and mutual commitment that are necessary for mentor/mentee relationships to thrive. Readers gain the understanding that mentors must make room for mentees, and mentees must allow perspectives from outside themselves to enrich and enlarge their lives.

Experiential Context

Chapter seven returns again to the fourfold emphasis of ministerial development from Gregory of Nazianzus's *Flight.* Williams suggests several questions for each area of clergy development. Those with a deep interest in mentoring others will find these questions rooted in the value of transformation. The essence of these questions will lead the mentee into a deep understanding of their own motives and into a reflection on the practical means for extending transformational dynamics into the lives of those whom they lead. It is at this juncture that the realization may come to focus that mentoring requires experiential context. How else could such penetrating questions be answered such as: "How do I respond to the indigenous pressures and stresses of pastoral ministry? . . . How is ministry affecting my relationship with God? . . . Where do

others see the presence and power of God in my ministry?"[7] Any pastor with a passion for mentoring other clergy is likely to use these questions as a primary resource for helping others reflect deeply on the praxis issues of their lives.

Dyadic Examples

Beginning with chapter seven, Williams takes us to the biblical and ecclesiastical justifications of pastoral mentoring. The key dyadic relationships of Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, Jesus and his disciples, and Paul with Timothy and Titus are noted. The ecclesiastical examples include both pre- and post-reformation examples from the time of Augustine of Hippo to such examples as Eduard Thurneysen, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Karl Barth in the twentieth century. Williams brings readers back to practical questions and reflections for those involved in the mentoring process. Chapter nine also suggests various sources for further consideration of mentoring dyads and contexts.

The essence of what Williams offers readers today is a look through history at this issue of clergy development in the context of an apprenticeship. This book calls to mind the reflection of the Apostle Paul to Timothy when he said, "The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Tm 2:2).[8]

Relevance

The relevance of Williams's book can be easily observed through a reflection on the issues facing clergy today. Although not included in Williams's text, a review of crisis issues within the American church can serve as a helpful background for exploring the mentoring model of ministry development. In the American church there are many issues of concern. From an empirical perspective of church growth, Olson notes, "In no single state did church attendance keep up with population growth!"[9] Dudley and Roozen have indicated that within the United States 50% of all congregations are either plateauing or declining.[10] The issue, however, of ministerial crises goes well beyond church performance objectives. The Fuller Institute of Church Growth conducted a survey of pastors in 1991 which reflected serious concerns for clergy. This study found that 80% of pastors believe that the pastoral ministry has affected their families negatively, 33% say that the ministry has been hazardous to their family, 75% of clergy reported that they have had a significant stress-related crisis at least one time in their ministry, 50% of clergy feel unable to meet the demands that are placed upon them, 90% indicated that they were inadequately trained to cope with their professional

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[7] Williams, *The Potter's Rib,* 167, 173.

[8] NIV.

[9] David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis: Groundbreaking Research Based on a National Database of over 200,000 Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 37.

[10] Carl S. Dudley and David A. Roozen, "Faith Communities Today: A Report on Religion in the United States Today," *Faith Communities Today*, March 2001, http://fact.hartsem.edu/Final%20FACTrpt.pdf

demands.[11] In America today, the average pastor lasts only five years at a church.[12] Nineteen percent of pastors have been forced out of their ministry at one point of their professional lives. London and Wiseman reflected the crises facing clergy today when they said:

> Unprecedented shifts in moral, social and economic conditions are battering congregations. These changing circumstances and declining values directly affect pastors and their way of life. Many of these difficulties were almost unknown in earlier periods of history. These changes seem to be taking the Church in the wrong direction at breakneck speed.[13]

With this summation of clergy issues, Williams's focus on developing clergy through the time proven method of mentoring is welcome.

II. DISCUSSION

Strengths

There are several strengths that make Williams's book a welcome addition to this concern of clergy development. Perhaps the most important strength is that clergy development through mentoring is a time tested approach. This approach can be witnessed throughout the last several hundred years of ecclesiastical history. Williams brings focus back to the salient source of Gregory of Nazianzus's *Flight*, which has often been neglected in recent history as a salient resource in clergy development. This source has served as a key resource for such profound works as Gregory the Great's *Book of Pastoral Rule*, which Williams notes was a key resource of ministerial development for a thousand years. To overlook these key resources is likely a major disservice to our serving and developing clergy.

Another key strength of this work is that it overviews the mentoring of clergy through church history and contemporizes a model for modern-day settings. The questions included in this work will serve as key tools to initiate deep reflection relative to personal motivations, theological considerations, and practical applications of discipleship practices. It is refreshing and encouraging to note that the crises in ministerial life are not new issues solely reflected in modern times. These issues in various forms have been noted since the inception of the church. This understanding lends credibility to the voices of the past to speak authoritatively to the issues of the present. Ecclesiastical history helps us conceptualize that the mentor/mentee dyad is not only helpful but possibly essential for modern-day clergy.

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[11] Fuller Institute of Church Growth, *1991 Survey of Pastors* (Pasadena, CA: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1991).

[12] The Barna Group, "A Profile of Protestant Pastors in Anticipation of 'Pastor Appreciation Month,'" *Barna Group* (2001 September), http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&Barna UpdateID=98

[13] H. B. London, Jr. and Neil B. Wiseman, *Pastors at Greater Risk* (Ventura: Regal, 2003), 35.

Limitations

The essence of Williams's work deals with the practical development of personal formation. While aspects of this work deal with the practical dimensions of extending ministry to others, the focus is dominantly on personal fitness, competencies, and readiness. These concepts, along with effectiveness, are considered salient in ministerial assessments.[14] Fitness focuses on the potential of ministers relative to their motivations and beliefs. Competencies are reflected in maturity of skills for judging and relating to others. In essence, it would move from interpersonal considerations to intrapersonal factors. Readiness suggests that individuals are ready to embrace the responsibilities before them in ministry. What is not as strongly emphasized is the effectiveness of what appropriate fitness, competence, and readiness facilitates in terms of performance variables within a localized context of ministry. In essence, Williams provides an excellent overview of the personal development of a minister's life but is somewhat lacking in the professional foci on performance variables that are often necessary within ecclesiastical organizations.

One consideration that is not clearly addressed is the issue of collectivism and individualism within mentor/mentee dyads. Many of the references are from a collectivistic context, such as that represented by Gregory of Nazianzus. Contextualizing how this model rooted in a collectivistic culture would express itself within an individualistic culture like America today would be helpful.

III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Williams's work on clergy development serves to remind the church today of the necessity of transformation through mentor/mentee dyads. Empirical research regarding ministerial effectiveness has been established since 1955,[15] and has focused much on how to quantify ministerial effectiveness. It must be noted that there appears to be no consensus among researchers on how to specifically measure this elusive concept of the ideal minister today.[16]

Due to the apparent crises that ministers are facing today both personally and in regard to ecclesiastical organizational objectives, dealing with the ambiguities of clergy development appears to be deeply needed. Williams helps readers understand how mentor/mentee dyads serve to clarify both the personal and practical foci of clergy

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[14] Richard A. Hunt, John E. Hinkle, Jr., and H. Newton Malony, "Overview of Dimensions and Issues," in *Clergy Assessment and Career Development*, ed. Richard A. Hunt, John E. Hinkle, Jr., and H. Newton Malony (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 13-18.

[15] Alan Nauss, "Assessing Ministerial Effectiveness: A Review of the Measures and Their Use" (unpublished manuscript, 1994); Thom S. Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 1993).

[16] J. E. Dittes, "Research on Clergymen: Factors Influencing Decisions for Religious Service and Effectiveness in the Vocation," *Religious Education* 57 (supplement; 1962): 141-165; H. Newton Malony, "Ministerial Effectiveness: A Review of Recent Research," *Pastoral Psychology* 33 (1984): 96-104; Alan Nauss, "Problems in Measuring Ministerial Effectiveness," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 11, no. 2 (June 1972): 141-151; Alan Nauss, "Ministerial Effectiveness in Ten Functions," *Review of Religious Research* 36, no. 1 (September 1994).

development. Williams argues for a return to an ancient form of clergy development through the concept of apprenticeship. This apprenticeship causes the overarching consideration that what we do and produce is deeply reflective of who we are.

There are few works today that explore the dynamics of clergy development from ancient ecclesiastical models. This work by Williams is a welcomed addition to the multidimensional nature of developing clergy.

About the Author

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